

# ART PAPERS

STRIKING IDEAS + MOVING IMAGES + SMART TEXTS

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PLEASURE  
DOUGLAS HUEBLER'S  
*EVERYONE ALIVE*

ELEGY  
AND PERFORMANCE:  
ANDREW KÖTTING

GOVERNMENT  
ART AND ANTI-  
PHOTOJOURNALISM

INFILTRATION  
SERENE AL-KAWAS'  
SPECIAL PROJECT







633 / Variable Piece #70: 1971

Fifteen one-inch portraits produced for the «everyone alive» project have been further selected to characterize...

AT LEAST THREE PEOPLE ALIVE THE XXth CENTURY  
WHOM THE XVIIth CENTURY ARTIST, ARTEMISIA  
GENTILESCHI, VERY LIKELY WOULD CHOOSE AS MODELS  
FOR HER REPRESENTATION OF A VIth CENTURY B.C.  
EVENT - IF SHE WERE TO PAINT IT TODAY

A photographic reproduction of Gentileschi's *Judith Beheading Holofernes* appears next to the photographs of the possible models. They have been arranged so that the choice for the Maidservant may be found in Row A, Holofernes in Row B, and Judith in Row C.

More than 90 photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

September 1978

Variable Piece #70 (In Process)  
Global

Throughout the remainder of the artist's lifetime he will photographically document, to the extent of his capacity, the existence of everyone alive in order to produce the most authentic and inclusive representation of the human species that may be assembled in that manner.

Editions of this work will be periodically issued in a variety of topical modes: '100,000 people', '1,000,000 people', '10,000 people', 'people personally known by the artist', 'look-alikes', 'over-laps', etc.

November 1971

Douglas Huebler<sup>1</sup>

*everyone alive:*  
**Douglas Huebler's Reason and Pleasure**

TEXT / JOHN MCKINNON

Douglas Huebler took a step towards the impossible when starting the series *Variable Piece #70*, 1971, also known as *everyone alive*.<sup>2</sup> He began the series—part of his larger project *Variable Piece*, which included recordings of happenings, performances, and life events—at the height of the conceptual art movement. The potential to record all of humankind through portraiture made *everyone alive* the most ambitious proposal of Huebler's career. In fact, he continued it until his death in 1997.

Huebler had used methods and systems of documentation to record events with maps, photographs, and descriptive language as early as 1967. His *Variable Piece* project combined a documentary approach, serial methodology, and an encyclopedic drive. The archival impulse was neither new nor unique to conceptual art. In the early 1900s, August Sander produced *People of the Twentieth Century*, a photographic index of German society. He classified the population into seven social types: the Farmer, the

Skilled Tradesman, the Woman, Classes and Professions, the Artists, the City, and the Last People. Sander unflinchingly portrayed his subjects' character and lifestyle through accurate details of their environment, clothes, hairstyle, and pose.

On the surface, Huebler's project to photographically document the general population may seem comparable. However, it differs insofar as it was purposefully designed to be unattainable. Acknowledging that the completion of the series was tied to his effort, choices, and ability, Huebler included the phrase (*In Process*) in the title of his grand statement. In this, he confessed to the infeasibility of the proposal and the limits of his own human capabilities. Huebler later added, "Such an idea provides me with both reason and pleasure for producing work under an umbrella of the impossibility of ever completing its pronounced purpose."<sup>3</sup>

Seemingly a futile exercise, Huebler's all-encompassing proposal also recalls the Map of the Empire from Jorge Luis Borges' short

story "On Exactitude in Science," which was reportedly so precise, and made with such cartographic integrity, that its "size was that of the Empire, and...coincided point for point with it."<sup>4</sup> Borges' map-making idealizes the documentary process to absurdity. Similarly, Huebler relied on an impractical archive as a form of parody.

Huebler made incompleteness an integral dimension of *everyone alive*, claiming to photograph everyone alive "to the extent of his capacity." This failsafe clause cleared the way for a versatile and open framework. Unlike Sander's typological groupings of portraits, Huebler intended the work to be "periodically issued" in editions to vary from "people personally known by the artist" to "1,000,000 people." Escaping expectations of comprehensiveness, he strove for an imaginative process that strategically defied expected systems and methods.

Although Huebler's proposal was radical, each work in *everyone alive* appears regimented because the photographs are accom-



panied by seemingly official typewritten descriptions. Huebler compiled, organized, and presented information about his sitters in much the same way that businesses, institutions or public entities gather vital statistics for licenses, credit cards or passports. Unlike official documents created by institutions of power, Huebler's series includes a personal set of rules and decisions, unique creative avenues, and takes pleasure in disorder. His documentary activity ventured from unbiased reportage. Purposefully manipulating the style of an objective system, Huebler often used the combination of image and text to create paradoxical documentation that both created and denied clear representation of his subjects. He photographed situations he deemed appropriate, directed subjects to create manufactured scenarios, and manipulated the results to serve his purposes. An early work in the series, 1/ *Variable Piece #70: 1971*, describes both his methodology and an individual subject: "In November, 1971 a number of photographs were made in New York City to document various aspects of 'everyone alive'; from those one was selected to represent: At least one person who may now be dead." This description exemplifies his sense of play, while admitting both the passing of time and the resulting impossibility to photograph everyone alive. Huebler described his selective recording process, which was filled with arbitrary diversions, as "either/or documentation."<sup>5</sup>

Huebler admitted, "The work is about the system," adding with a wink, "The system is not proof of anything either."<sup>6</sup> In order to produce new amusing and peculiar meanings, he took liberties with his documents to subvert an assumed serial or chronological order. For example, his text and photography function together but do not necessarily accurately illustrate real events. As explained by Gordon Hughes in a 2007 article, Huebler produced different versions of his photographic grid in *Variable Piece #101*.<sup>7</sup> This piece features expressive portraits of the artist Bernd Becher along with Huebler's instructions for him to pose as "a priest, a criminal, a lover, an old man, a policeman, an artist, 'Bernd Becher,' a philosopher, a spy and a nice guy." Hughes astutely directs attention

to two different published versions of this piece which include the portraits in different order and provide new associations from the dissimilar descriptions. Much as he shuffled the Becher portraits, Huebler also altered the linear order of the photos taken by museum personnel in *Variable Piece #70, 1971, 63*. The numbered photos, as reproduced in the catalog *Variable, Etc.*, do not follow an assumed sequential order to represent each day the photographs were taken. Huebler often used this strategy "so that 'time' would not be read through a series of ordered events but rather as an all-over field."<sup>8</sup> His "either/or documentation" denied the importance of chronological arrangements in favor of surface, disorder, and distraction.

Photography was integral to Huebler's "either/or documentation." In the pages of *Artforum*, John Miller argued that Huebler did little else than to demonstrate "the camera's technological and existential facticity."<sup>9</sup> Miller focused on production and the machine-like qualities of the camera, portraying Huebler as a dutiful worker performing a task in the postindustrial era. While Huebler admitted the duplicative properties of the camera, he did not liken his practice to mechanical production as Miller asserted, but rather denied it. In fact, Huebler described the camera's replication method as "the most dumbbell possible kind of system."<sup>10</sup> He adamantly claimed that his photographs functioned as "absolute documents because they don't show anything pictorially interesting."<sup>11</sup> His photographs often appear unskilled. His aim was not to show technical prowess, but to record an event created by his instructions or an impromptu framing. He used a camera when and where he received inspiration, then later assembled select images into his "either/or documentation." For example, *Variable Piece #70, 1971, 633* includes one-inch portraits of anonymous people cropped from the background of numerous photographs. He gathered these grainy, blurry, and indistinguishable images into a grid to depict "At least three people alive [in] the XXth Century whom the XVIIth Century artist, Artemisia Gentileschi, very likely would choose as models for her representation of a VIth Century B.C. event—if she

#### Variable Piece #101 West Germany

On December 17, 1972 a photograph was made of Bernd Becher at the instant almost exactly after he had been asked to «look like» a priest, a criminal, a lover, an old man, a policeman, an artist, «Bernd Becher», a philosopher, a spy and a nice guy... in that order.

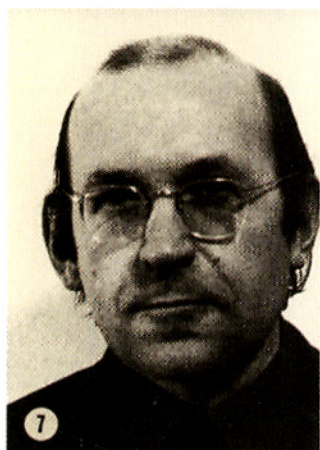
To make it almost impossible for Becher to remember his own «faces» more than two months were allowed to pass before prints of the photographs were sent to him; the photographs were numbered differently from the original sequence and Becher was asked to make the «correct» associations with the given verbal terms.

His choices were:

- |                |               |
|----------------|---------------|
| 1 Bernd Becher | 6 Policeman   |
| 2 Nice Guy     | 7 Priest      |
| 3 Spy          | 8 Philosopher |
| 4 Old Man      | 9 Criminal    |
| 5 Artist       | 10 Lover      |

Ten photographs and this statement join together to constitute the final form of this piece.

March 1973





were to paint it today." In this example, Huebler challenged the integrity of his own photographs with a system that diverted original meanings to other, unexpected directions. As such, while Miller examined the use of photography in Huebler's recording process, he failed to discuss the detraction from neutrality, individual choices, and parody presented by the "either/or documentation." With forthright admissions about his process and accompanying instructions for the work, Huebler exposed his documentation as an elaborate construction.

Huebler released himself from a strict documentary process to embrace a continuously resourceful and intuitive approach with unique instructions, photographic processes, scenarios, and aesthetic choices for each work. Mark Godfrey described the individual artworks as "games" in his catalog essay "A Sense of Huebler."<sup>12</sup> Throughout the series, Huebler used free-association to make work that he found enjoyable, including portraits of any-

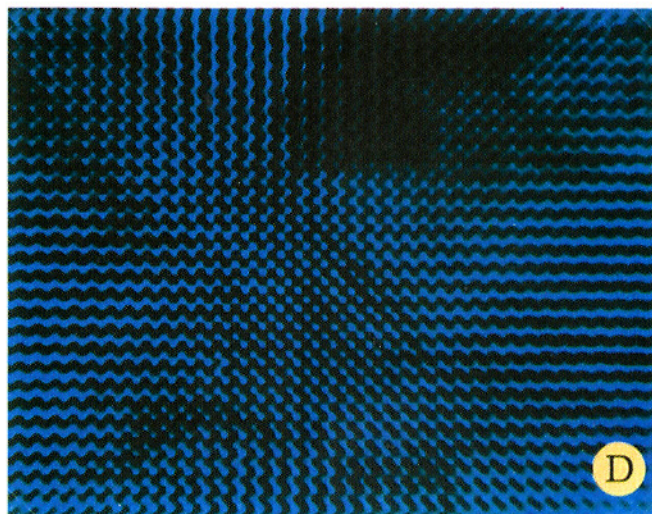
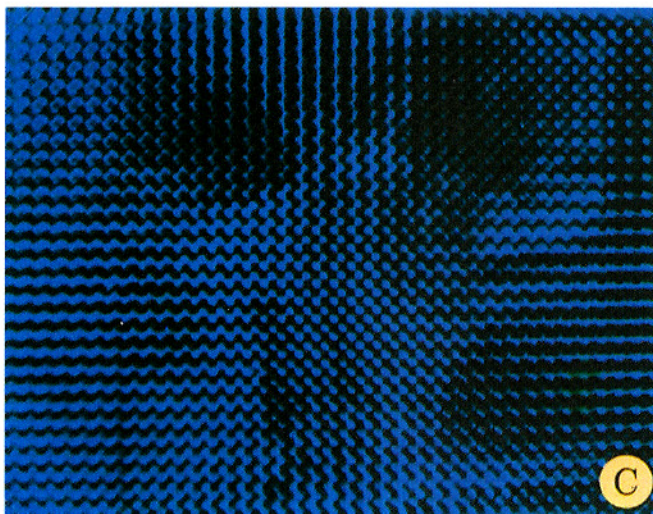
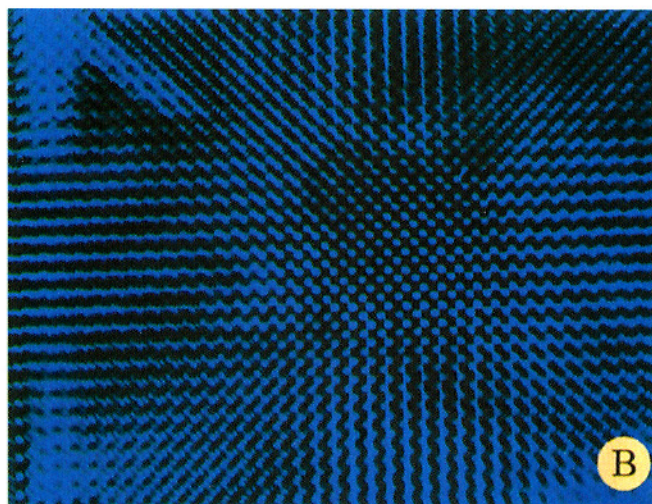
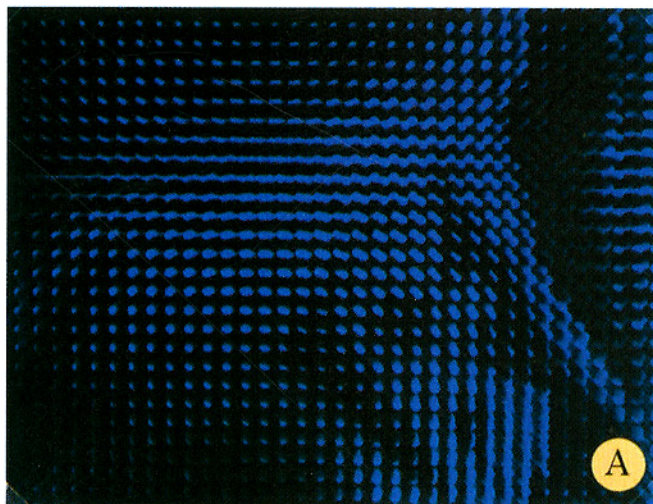
mous strangers, people he knew, mannequins, and individuals who looked alike. With potential material anywhere in the world, Huebler never seemed to be without inspiration. According to writer Anne Pontégnie, he continually took photographs at a terrace in New York while meeting with her and Marianne Van Leeuw in 1994 about an upcoming exhibition and catalog.<sup>13</sup> She likened these photographs to notes for a later experiment, which may or may not have been completed. For *Variable Piece #34, Bradford, Massachusetts, 1970*, Huebler photographed eight people at the instant he exclaimed, "You have a beautiful face!" The resulting portraits have a wide range of expressions from shock to embarrassment. This commonly cited piece is emblematic of the sense of play that is central to the *Variable Piece* series. For the less innocent *Variable Piece #70, (In Process) Global, 1971, 90F (Blue Series)*, Huebler used grainy and tinted effects to mask subjects from pornography magazines. He described

the grid of images as: "At least one person who might feel extremely embarrassed if his, or her, mother were ever to see the whole picture." Huebler's use of found images further denies his interest in direct recordings in favor of pleasurable diversions. In these instances and many others, Huebler's ability to transform everyday situations gave him constant fodder for his project.

Huebler's personal delight with the monumental *everyone alive* project is further apparent within works that include entertaining text. Huebler often wrote captions for his photographs much like those from a newspaper or magazine; however his labels may or may not apply to the associated subjects. Huebler's work is filled with popular sayings, aphorisms, and clichés—which he described as "cultural readymades"—to evoke new ideas of the people photographed.<sup>14</sup> For *Variable Piece #70, 1971, 100E*, he photographed willing participants at art events holding randomly selected cards in front of their bodies. The







90 F (Blue Series) / Variable Piece #70: 1971

«Portraits» have been made from photographs originally printed in various pornographic magazines in order to document the existence of certain people for the «everyone alive» project in order to represent:

AT LEAST ONE PERSON WHO MIGHT FEEL EXTREMELY EMBARRASSED IF HIS, OR HER, MOTHER WERE EVER TO SEE THE WHOLE PICTURE

(Because others involved in the pornographic activity are not meant to be included in this context their identities have been «screened» through certain art-like procedures.)

Eight photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

February 1974



signs identified these individuals—albeit through potentially false statements—with phrases such as: “One person who is as pretty as a picture” and “At least one person who is beautiful but dumb.” The crowd photograph in *Variable Piece #70, 1971, 19* is labeled as “At least one person who might feel pleased to have been made the subject of art.” In this example, the viewer may then choose which individual in the crowd the blanket statement may apply to, if any. For *Variable Piece #70, 1971, 63*, Huebler instructed museum personnel to photograph an image from a television set and “chance determined” the associated captions. Grainy images from soap operas and children’s television programs are associated with “At least one person who is very confused about the present function of art” and “At least one person who always has the last word.” Huebler’s humorous half-truths and clichés produce new fictional meanings that destabilize an objective process and the photograph’s original content.

Huebler was far from the compliant, encyclopedic replicator endeavoring to complete an archive. *everyone alive* was set in motion by an impossible intention. The absurdly large series was a platform from which he could freely institute his own rules and system of working. With a parody of form and technique, his “either/or documentation” neutralized a disinterested process expected of documentary and archival media. He strategically treated real events captured through the camera’s lens and his own subjective manipulations with equal weight. The inexactitude created by *everyone alive* meanders and weaves new tales within the semblance of a documentary structure. Using purposeful diversions, he destabilized a potentially rigorous and all-encompassing series with intuition, selective choices, and wit. Huebler’s playful choices float to the surface of his production, where they are seemingly unexpected, in order to become critical of the forms they emulate. To read his text, see his photographs, and associate the two—whether believable or not—is to enter Huebler’s bazaar of constant change and chance. He joyfully employed free-association, humorous antics, and misleading information to manipulate the concept of an archive, rendering it patently absurd. The impractical project of *everyone alive* did not limit Huebler, it liberated him.

#### NOTES

1. Felix Zdenek, ed., *Konzept-Kunst*, Basel: Kunstmuseum Basel, 1972, np.
2. Huebler referred to the series as *Variable Piece #70, 1971* and *everyone alive* interchangeably. See Frédéric Paul and Douglas Huebler, “Truro, Massachusetts, October 11-14, 1992,” in *Douglas Huebler <<Variable>>, Etc.*, Limousin: Fonds Régional d’Art Contemporain du Limousin, 1993, 125-130.
3. Douglas Huebler, “Untitled,” in *Origin and Destination: Alighiero E Boetti, Douglas Huebler, Marianne Van Leeuw and Anne Pontégne*, eds., Bruxelles: Société des Expositions du Palais des Beaux-Arts de Bruxelles, 1997, 133.
4. Originally written by Borges in 1946, he gives a fictional citation as his source: Suarez Miranda, *Viajes de varones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658. Jorge Luis Borges, “On Exactitude in Science,” in *Collected Fictions by Jorge Luis Borges*, Andrew Hurley, trans., New York: Penguin Books, 1999, 325.
5. Patricia Norvell, “Interview with Douglas Huebler July 25, 1969” in *Recording Conceptual Art: Early Interviews with Barry, Huebler, Kallenbach, LeWitt, Morris, Oppenheim, Siegel, Smithson, Weiner*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001, 140.
6. Norvell, 147.
7. Gordon Hughes, “Game Face: Douglas Huebler and the Voiding of Photographic Portraiture,” *Art Journal* 66:04 (Winter 2007): 53-69.
8. Paul and Huebler, 128.
9. John Miller, “Double or Nothing,” *Artforum* 44:08 (April 2006), 222.
10. Norvell, 140.
11. Ibid.
12. Mark Godfrey, *Douglas Huebler*, London: Camden Arts Centre, 2002, 8-10.
13. In May 1994, Anne Pontégne and curator Marianne Van Leeuw met Huebler in New York to discuss his upcoming exhibition and catalog. *Origin and Destination*, 140.
14. Paul and Huebler, 130.

John McKinnon is Program Coordinator for the Society for Contemporary Art at The Art Institute of Chicago and a frequent contributor to ART PAPERS. He recently co-curated *Another Kind of Vapor* at White Flag Projects, St. Louis. The exhibition featured works by IAIN BAXTER&, Robert Heineken, David Lieske, Paul McCarthy, Otto Piene, William Pope.L, Dieter Roth, Ed Ruscha, and Jennifer West.

The author thanks to Michael Newman, David Raskin, and Rachel Weiss for their advice on this subject.



**Variable Piece #34**

Bradford, Massachusetts

Eight people were photographed at the instant exactly after each had been told by the artist's assistant: «You have a beautiful face», or «You have a very special face», or «You have a remarkable face», or something very much like that.

The eight photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

December 1970



**Variable Piece #105**

London

Eighteen mannequins were photographed at two minute intervals through the windows of clothing stores on Oxford Street. Immediately after each photograph was made the artist turned and photographed the next person that he saw was of the same sex as the previous mannequin photographed, thereby juxtaposing a model of reality with a real life counterpart.

A contact proof print and twelve photographs join with this statement to constitute the form of this piece.

1972

